DESI ANWAR

BEING INDONESIAN

Life, Strife and the Pursuit of Democracy in Indonesia

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seat view to the political scene and developments in Indonesian society over the last decades. I truly enjoyed reading her observations."

— **Traavik, Stig Ingemar**, Ambassador of Norway
Indonesia | ASEAN | Timor Leste

"Desi Anwar has been a compass for many trying to understand one of the world's most intriguing and beautiful countries. She stood at the frontline of Indonesia's youngest history and her observations take you on the incredible journey this important country has undertaken in the past two decades and I was lucky enough to witness. From authoritarian rule to one of the most vibrant democracies worldwide: Its time Desi's Indonesia stops being a wall flower at the international stage but becomes the star of the party!"

—**Step Vaessen**, Correspondent Al Jazeera English

"Indonesia matters—it is a country of 250 million people, economically dynamic, democratic and the world's largest Muslim population. As a G20 country accounting for 40% of the ASEAN economy, Indonesia will play a key role alongside India and China in determining the shape of the 'Asian Century'. But as Desi Anwar argues, not enough people outside Indonesia know that. Ms Anwar, one of Indonesia's most brilliant journalists, charts the ups and downs of Indonesian politics and explains how national characteristics define and shape Indonesian history. There are many I have hugely enjoyed reading her columns and am delighted that they have come together in this excellent compilation. Get a cup of coffee, a comfortable chair, dive in and enjoy this book."

—**Moazzam Malik**, British Ambassador to
Indonesia, ASEAN and Timor-Leste

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Life, Strife and the Pursuit of Democracy in Indonesia 1997-2007

Collected Essays

by DESI ANWAR

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Foreword

'Kopi Luwak' is the obsession of a grouchy character played by Jack Nicholson in Hollywood's box office hit 'The Bucket List' who prides himself as a rare connoisseur of this coffee's acquired taste. What he doesn't know is that this distinctive and prized coffee has a rather less than savoury origins – the coffee is made from berries that have gone through the digestive tracts, that is to say, from the faeces of civet cats or weasels from the islands of Sumatra, Java and Sulawesi.

Meanwhile, the only time I've heard the city of Jakarta mentioned in a film was in a Hollywood action flick about terrorism and fighting enemies (I can't remember what the title was as these films are all so similar) where the actor made a reference to a trip to a really dangerous place full of terrorists, which was, yes, you guessed it – Jakarta. (Obviously the film's producer was trying to impress the audience with his knowledge of the most remote, exotic and dangerous place he could come up with at the time, seeing that Dubrovnik, Bratislava and Moscow since the fall of Communism are no longer sexy 'enemy' places)

Indonesia takes up quite a bit of space on the map and yet it hardly makes a blip on the international radar screen. The only times she makes the headlines are when the country is associated with global nightmares (dangerous terrorists, Islamist zealots, killer tsunamis, etc.) While the nice impressions one hardly associate with Indonesia at all – such as Bali Island, Kopi Luwak and Java. Mysterious, exotic and difficult to pinpoint where exactly it is on the map or what they are to begin with.

Go to any bookshop and there is hardly any book on Indonesia one can find on the shelf. What precious little there are were written by a handful of so-called 'Indonesianists' while books written by Indonesian writers are fewer still. My guess is the primary cause for this is language barrier (due to the country's colonial history).

Unlike neighbours Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines for instance, English is alien to the majority of Indonesians whose mother tongue is still their regional language and their second Indonesian language. And since the world's lingua franca, the currency for international business and communication and the repository of knowledge is all in English, Indonesia's 'tongue-tiedness' is a great handicap in the global conversation. On the international stage Indonesia is the extra with no speaking parts: in the world ballroom, a shy wall flower.

Torn between the desire to show off at home and yet too timid to venture too far out of the front yard, Indonesia is a country bursting with energy but also frustrated by her own inability to get things moving in the way she wants it. Mainly because she's still confused as to how she wants things done.

As a journalist and thus very much at the country's pulse, I've tried to capture the shades and nuances of these conflicting emotions, sometimes as a detached observer, other times sharing those emotions, but almost always with an understanding of how these emotions come about not only because I have been a TV broadcaster for almost two decades, but also because I am very much part of that society and, more importantly, an Indonesian.

These articles are snippets of personal observations that reflect Indonesia's often messy democratic transition and colourful social dynamism in the last decade focusing mainly on issues that preoccupied the ordinary Indonesian urban dweller by someone who, unlike ordinary Indonesians, was brought up in the West, and who wrote with the English speaking audience in mind.

Why? Because until now, even with increasing 'globalisation', I believe the Indonesia story is still far from being told. And as long as she remains silent and inarticulate, there will always be a piece missing in the global jigsaw puzzle; a hole in the world's wonderful tapestry.

Desi Anwar

Introduction

Indonesia today is one of the world's largest democracies, a Republic with a directly elected President and Vice President, having multiple political parties, and a country with a vibrant and dynamic Media comprising of tens of national TV channels, hundreds of local TV stations, countless newspapers and magazines, all revelling in a freedom of expression that is the envy of many of her neighbouring countries.

Indonesia in the twenty first century, is one of the most active and largest users of the Social Media whose chatter and conversations, especially on political issues, often dominate the global trending topics on Twitter, making Jakarta more or less the Twitter capital of the world.

Indonesia these days, is often held up as an example that being a country with the largest Muslim population is perfectly compatible with Freedom and a full-fledged Democracy.

However, it has not always been so.

Barely over two decades ago, Indonesia was a country that had been ruled for the past three decades by an authoritarian government under the iron-fist presidency of the military general Soeharto.

Politics and politicians were impotent with a rubber stamp Parliament whose job it was to ensure the perpetuity of the Soeharto New Order regime in a five-yearly charade of elections conducted by the few government sponsored political parties.

When I started my career in television, with RCTI, Indonesia's first commercial TV channel owned by ruling President Soeharto's eldest son in 1990, Indonesia only had one state television channel, TVRI, acting more or less as the mouthpiece and PR of the government.

Censorship of the Press was the order of the day, and under the Big Brother watchful eye of the Ministry of Information, the Media more or less had to practice self-censorship if they wanted to keep their license going, tiptoeing around issues that directly criticise government policies, the President, his family and his cronies.

Voices of criticisms in the country were frowned upon and would be met with heavy-handed treatment, ostracisms, and even mysterious disappearances. Dissent was swiftly dealt with by the military and areas of the country that did not want to toe the line of the central government were put under military operation closed to the Media. In other words, there was no room in Indonesia for critics, trouble makers and opposition to the government.

Living in those days, it was hard to think of a future other than the continuity of this authoritarian regime.

Until the 1997 Asian currency crisis infected Indonesia and turned into a crisis that became a total crisis that brought street protests and demonstrations on an unprecedented scale, culminating in the students' occupation of the Parliament building supported by the entire country through a nation-wide reform movement called 'Reformasi.'

Finally bringing the Parliament to its knees, the whole Soeharto cabinet to resign and finally, leaving no choice to President Soeharto himself to step down and hand over his power to his Vice President in 1998.

Thus, democracy in Indonesia was born.

These essays trace the journey of Indonesia from the twilight of the New Order government under President Soeharto just before the financial crisis in 1997, to the downfall of the authoritarian regime and the country's transition during 'Reformasi' into democracy, until the early years of the new millennium, reflecting the mood and concerns of the time.

They chronicle events during the historic moment of Indonesia's transformation from the many decades of censored media to complete freedom of the press. They are my observations and comments on the political, economic, social and cultural issues that were the overriding topics of those significant and turbulent years, as well as my personal musings on what it meant to be Indonesian in the midst of a shifting reality and a changing world.

They include the volatile atmosphere in the country in the year prior to the riots, demonstrations and the Reform movement or 'Reformasi', that ended with the abdication of the country's iron fisted President Soeharto in 1998, as well as the euphoria, the challenges and the disappointment that came as Indonesia began her grand experiment with democracy.

Today, Indonesia is well on her path towards a middle class country committed to a plural and diverse society. To be sure, the challenges of leading a democratic life are still there, as are the dreams for a prosperous and just nation. While many of the problems the country faces nowadays continue to remain unchanged and unsolved, making many of the essays still relevant to events currently happening in Indonesia.

Indeed, issues such as the economic crisis, environmental problems and urbanisation touched on over a decade ago, are the same issues that Indonesia has to deal with well into the twenty first century with very little change or progress.

Having said that however, Indonesia has come a long way from those dark years when political oppression, censorship and a muzzled media was the normal way of life, to becoming a nation that has little fear but plenty of opinions.

All of the articles have originally appeared in English language publications in Indonesia, namely *The Indonesian Observer, The Jakarta Post, Tempo English,* as well as the *Japanese Daily, The Mainichi Shimbun,* published in the decade between 1997 and 2007.

PART 1

The Abuse of Power

In the early days of 1997, little was it realised that Indonesia was at the twilight of its New Order regime. Media censorship was still strongly felt and yet the writings were already on the wall. The sense of impending doom was almost palpable.

My essays of that time, even when written in English, were still conscious of the need for self-censorship and employed carefully, and often painfully, veiled references when making statements of criticisms against the ruling power and the authoritarian regime. A trick that journalists often had to resort to in order to avoid censure by the Ministry of Information.

It goes without saying that the Press under the Soeharto era did not enjoy freedom of expression. Journalists had to stay away from sensitive subjects such as SARA (tribe, ethnicity, religion) the reporting of which was feared to provoke instability and conflict, and to refrain from openly criticising the government and of course, President Soeharto, his family and his cronies.

If there was a role of the press, it was not as a fourth pillar in democracy, but as a means by which the government implemented its policy of national development.

Nevertheless, the increasing sense of discontent and warning of the non-sustainability of the abuse of power was there, with every now and then, flashes of troubles taking place in the country.

Bread and Circuses

The Roman satiric poet Juvenal first coined the phrase 'bread and circuses', a way of placating the common people from the urge to rise up in arms against the ruling Roman aristocrats; the 'bread' to fill the stomach and the 'circuses' to keep them amused and thus uncritical of their social conditions.

For hundreds of years the Roman public was regaled with theatrical dramas, chariot races, gladiatorial fights to the death and the spectacle of criminals and Christians being thrown to the lions. The purpose was largely to divert the public from economic and political dissatisfaction.

The ancient Greeks before that had a more sophisticated and less cynical way of lifting the spirit of the people away from their mundane existence; mainly in the form of catharsis obtained from witnessing the passions, the trials and tribulations of the heroes and heroines of Tragic plays.

Confronted by the workings of an inexorable (and horrible) fate, the tragic hero rises to the level of grandeur and superhuman dignity in his suffering. But then, the natural order that our hero attempts to flaunt is restored and the spectator purged. Later on in the centuries, in the age of Shakespeare and Racine, tragedy becomes poetic justice and catharsis becomes vindication. In the tragic plays, the spectator sees justice played out, the wicked punished and virtue rewarded.

Passions in the forms of strong emotions such as love, fear, hatred, anger, pity and morality are inherent human conditions that, like hunger, need to be satisfied. Ancient rulers realise that boredom and apathy carry in the people dissatisfaction and therefore, the seed of destruction. In ancient governments based on injustices such as slavery, religious bigotry and authoritarianism, it was important to purge these potentially dangerous passions from the people by public displays of justice being upheld. The history of mankind is a tapestry of crucifixions, beheadings, witch dunking, public hangings, lynching and other gory forms of public torture devised for criminals and other social outcasts.

Once thieves and robbers were hanged, drawn and quartered, adulterers stoned, slaves whipped, heretics and witches burned at the stake and other public enemies disposed of under the axe-man's chopper and bodies thrown to the dogs. During the French Revolution, watching the blades of Madame Guillotine beheading the heads of the nobility became a family outing with little old ladies knitting in the front row. While during China's Cultural Revolution, intellectuals were made to don foolscaps, publicly ridiculed and sent to plough the fields.

Life became less colourful with the emergence of democracy and human rights however. But the passions to be purged are still here nevertheless; the basic human need to see life played out, where wrongs are corrected, crimes punished and virtue rewarded. Fortunately there are the Olympic Games and European soccer where the human spirit is lifted temporarily to the heights of joy watching the strongest, the fastest and highest triumph and the best team wins.

There are no more hangings and guts drawn of course, but on the milder level we can trust Hollywood and mega rock concerts for some good old-fashioned catharsis. And recently at least, some TVs are thoughtful enough to broadcast bloody murder trials for spectators to gloat over.

We can leave it to the tabloid journalists to perform the modern version of public lynching of bringing crooked politicians and undignified Royals to public scorn. While politics of course, are the modern version of ancient dramas with all the trappings: the conflict, the agonising debates, the promises made and broken, the triumphs and the eventual defeat. Here is the manifestation of human ingenuity, courage, filings, strengths, weaknesses, justice and corruption, all for public display and judgment.

But governments should beware. In instances where the people are not able to properly channel their passions or express their emotions, it is more than likely that they spill out onto the streets and create their own circuses. And that as we know, will have disastrous consequences.

30th January 1997 - *The Indonesian Observer*

Dancing in the Air

In observing the national press day, spare a thought for the Indonesian journalist who often gets bad press about his poor professional quality. Although the Indonesian press is far from perfect, it must be admitted that having to navigate the gauntlet between a constant charge of not being objective and sowing confusion on one side and the scorn for practicing self-censorship and acting as press releases on the other, is by no means an easy task

The western media, who have the luxury of only seeking the naked truth (news is news is news) as its primary goal, might well wonder about the heavily attired information here that goes by the name of news. To unveil the substance, the reader often has to scale the mountain of cumbersome jargons and swim the sea of elusive aphorisms.

Even then, the substance might not lie hidden in the depth of the lines themselves, but tucked somewhere in-between. That is, if the substance is there at all. More often than not, the real news lies in the lost valley of unreported events and unspoken words where it will take a courageous explorer to find them. Many in the west would regard the whole thing as a turgid exercise designed solely to please the ruler and dupe the public, and the news stories ultimately having no intrinsic news value in themselves.

In order to understand news in Indonesia, it is important first of all to dismiss the notion that news values are

absolute and that serving the truth is the code of ethics that all journalists from Vancouver to Vanuatu have to uphold. News, rather, is in the eye of the beholder and reporting, like politics, is the art of the possible, dealing less with idealism but more with shared realities.

Western news values were largely formed by 17th century entrepreneurs and until now continue to be driven by economic factors. These commercial press systems care mostly about making money for their owners. The concerns too are still basically on sellable matters such as the doings of prominent persons, conflicts, the sensational and the unusual.

Meanwhile, the importance of objectivity arose out of economic necessity as many news agencies were formed and compete to serve multifarious clients. With fierce competition, the advent of new technologies and the growing obsession for the new and the now, timeliness more than ever, is becoming an important factor for the western media. The ability to show news unfolding in 'live' news programs is increasingly becoming the value of the news more than the substance and significance of the news itself.

In developing countries on the other hand, former colonies such as Indonesia which are new to the modern concept of national sovereignty, economics and technology, truth-seeking and live-reporting often have to take a back-seat to more pressing issues such as development, social responsibility, national integration and education. Ideally this should translate into telling the stories about the community or the nation as accurately as possible and in the way that individual citizen will benefit.

The role of the mass media is to hold a society together, give information upon which the society can base informed judgment and facilitate social development, growth and progress.

If this sounds like an excuse for concealing bad news (the meat and potatoes of the western media) you're probably right, but this does not make it wrong in the same way that there is nothing